'When H.A.R.L.I.E Was One' is two for Gerrold

By Joe Bustillos
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Science fiction writer David Gerrold found himself in an unusual position last year. His publisher, Bantam Books, gave him the OK to rewrite his 1972 classic, "When H.A.R.L.I.E Was One."

After all this time, Gerrold wondered if he would be able to conjure up the spirit of "HARLIE." With the march of technology and no small amount of irony, Gerrold expressed doubts about whether he would be able to recreate "HARLIE" on a personal computer.

In the original book, "HARLIE" is a self-programming computer that appears to be malfunctioning. "HARLIE" was programmed to be a simulation of a living human, a Human Analog Replication (the first part of his name). But the computer ventured into questions that call for experiencing life rather than sticking to questions about knowledge or understanding. This results is what its designers call "periods of irrationality."

HARLIE's human mentor, David Auberson, becomes convinced that these "periods of irrationality" are signs that the computer has become a living being. HARLIE is no longer just a simulation of a living being to Auberson.

The ramifications of this assertion are brought to the fore when the finacial powers-that-be, the company president and the chairman of the board, demand some tangible return on their investment. Auberson knows that a price tag can't be put on life, even computer-generated life. At the same time Auberson can't shake the feeling that he's being fooled by this "neurotic pile of sand."

AUBRSN to HARLIE: "It's hard to escape the suspicion that underneath it all, you might really be nothing more than just a very clever programming trick."

HARLIE: "But, Auberson—I am nothing more than just a very clever programming trick. So are you. Your programmer was so clever that you think you're a human being. So was mine. I think I'm alive."

AUBRSN: "HARLIE, I don't know whether I'm sitting here being conned by a machine or actually talking to a real soul. I can't tell the difference."

HARLIE: "May I offer you the same compliment? I have never really been certain if you were machine or human either."

The problem this rewrite presented to Gerrold is that HARLIE was a creation of his era. In 1972 computers and humans communicated through the clankity-clank of teletypes and card-punch machines (which Gerrold simulated with the clatter of his IBM Selectric Model 1).

Gerrold writes in his introduction: "The technology of that machine was as much a part of the writer's thoughts. HARLIE's words came pouring out with a satisfying solid sound . . . The typing was a physical joy as well as an exhilarating emotional experience. The loudest sound the personal computer makes is a control-G beep."

But Gerrold discovered that HARLIE not only felt at home on the screen of his IBM PC-clone, but liked it there better.

Beyond these physical elements, one must be aware that rewriting a classic is a risky proposition. Can the author rewrite a classic without destroying that element that made the work a classic in the first place?

Can you imagine someone asking the late Frank Herbert to rewrite "Dune?" I mean, all of this not only goes against good economic sense, but also the American philosophy, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

But Gerrold's response is that the earlier version doesn't represent his best work anymore.

So, was it worth the risk or not?

In the early 70s, the theme of humankind rediscovering itself through its creations (specifically computers) was no doubt an intriguing idea. But in 1988, the theme has become a bit threadbare. Gerrold's newer audience is likely to miss the significance of the ideas that he is presenting in this newer version. Of course, that isn't the fault of the new version or its rewrite but the passage of time and how his ideas were later copied (a notable film example is "The Blade Runner").

What does work with this book is the relationship between Auberson and his computer alter-ego, HARLIE. Of the two characters, Auberson tends to get a bit long winded but such is the practice of science fiction characters who find themselves grappling with the meaning of life.

It should be noted, however, that Gerrold manages to avoid the stereotypical science fiction plot line where the fate of the universe rests on the decision or action of a single likeable underdog: "Luke, Luke, forget your common sense and trust the force."

David Gerrold's "When HARLIE Was One, Release 2.0," is just as good the second time around.